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WHERE HAVE ALL THE YOUNG GIRLS GONE?
New evidence of the rise in girl foeticide in India

The widespread availability of ultrasound scans in India is giving rise to abortions of female foetuses on an unprecedented scale, according to new research by Professor Sonia Bhalotra from the University of Bristol's Centre for Market and Public Organisation.

Her study of sex-selective abortion in India reveals that nearly half a million girls are aborted each year, which is more than the number of girls born annually in Britain. The practice is concentrated among relatively rich and educated Hindu families. This is consistent with 'modern' women being more receptive to new technologies and their wanting to have fewer children. Muslim women may have a stronger abhorrence of abortion.

Before this study, there was considerable anecdotal evidence of girl abortion in India, but no direct records of the practice. Using information on half a million births in India over more than three decades, this research identifies a dramatic decrease in the ratio of girls to boys being born after and only after the arrival of ultrasound machines. It finds that families who have a firstborn son have less of an incentive to engage in sex selection than families that have a firstborn daughter. The strategy of comparing the ratio of girl to boy births in the population before and after the arrival of ultrasound and in families with and without a firstborn son takes out of the equation factors other than foeticide that might influence the sex ratio at birth.

Sex-selective abortion is illegal in India since 1996 but it is continuing at an increasing pace. The scanners are getting smaller and more mobile and a scan costs about £10, which is inexpensive for the rich and affordable for the poor. Advertisements in rural areas highlight how small this sum is relative to the cost of dowry. Ultrasound technology is improving continuously, enabling more reliable resolution of the foetal image earlier in pregnancy.

The research also shows that parents are conducting prenatal sex selection even after they have one son. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the ideal family structure for Indian families is to have two boys and one girl.

Son preference is an old tradition in India and other parts of Asia. Previously, *poor* families with limited resources for food and health care prioritised their sons because sons deliver later-life advantages such as old-age security. This has, over the centuries, led to a gradual erosion of the share of girls and women in society through neglect. This research suggests a new characterisation of the problem: girls from *richer* families are now being eliminated before birth on an unprecedented scale.

The scale of the problem suggests a future of unmarried men at the bottom of the socio-economic distribution, increasing violence against women and other ills of an unbalanced society.

Professor Bhalotra comments:

‘While the availability of ultrasound scans plays a crucial role in enabling girl abortion, it also plays a positive role in improving pre-natal care.

‘The use of ultrasound for sex-selective abortion touches on many of the dilemmas of modern times, including the ethics of scientific progress. It also raises wider issues of gender inequality, human rights and freedom of choice.’

ENDS

Notes to editors

Sonia Bhalotra and Tom Cochrane. Where have all the young girls gone? Identifying sex selection in India. CMPO Working Paper No. 10/254 is available to download from <http://www.bris.ac.uk/cmpo/publications/papers/2010/wp254.pdf>.

Professor Bhalotra is available for interview.

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